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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ABUJA 000680

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SUBJECT: NIGERIA: WEEKLY POLITICAL WRAP UP - FEB 25 TO MAR 1

Classified by DCM Andrews for reason 1.5 (d.)

Cabinet Reshuffle In The Works?

1. (C) The Senate on February 27 consented to the President's February 26 nomination of Dr. Olu Agunloye as Minister without Portfolio. Agunloye, a physicist by training, was a close friend of slain Attorney General Ige. Like Ige, Agunloye hails from the Southwest and is a member of the Yoruba-dominated Alliance of Democracy political party. Some Senators speculated during his brief appearance before them that eventually Agunloye will head the Ministry of Solid Minerals.

2. (C) Obasanjo's critics, particularly those in the North, will see Agunloye's appointment as added evidence that Obasanjo has embraced a "Southwest" strategy of solidifying ties to his Yoruba homeland in the run up to the 2003 election. Many in the North believe that Obasanjo is pursuing this strategy to the point of ignoring Northern leaders, and their concerns. If Agunloye is given the solid minerals brief, these Northerners will see his appointment as detrimental to their interests. Much of Nigeria's solid mineral deposits are in the North. Some Northerners will view Agunloye as an interloper trying to control the resources and revenues from resources which they believe more rightfully should be controlled by one of their own.

3. (C) Agunloye's appointment also has revived speculation about a major cabinet reshuffling. Obasanjo has to be aware that his popularity is flagging and that his Administration needs a tonic. A cabinet reshuffling would give him leave to jettison some non-performing ministers under the pretext that he is freeing them from their duties to allow them to pursue their ambitions for elective office. However, removing ministers is only half the equation. The other half is their replacements. The reshuffling will not improve Obasanjo's political standing unless replacements are a cut above their predecessors. With only a year left in his term, convincing honest, highly competent people to take jobs for such a brief duration will be difficult unless Obasanjo has plans beyond 2003.

Waiting to Hear From Above

4. (C) Despite the intensified speculation about a cabinet reshuffling and a 2003 reelection bid, President Obasanjo continues to hold those with inquiring minds at bay. Deflecting an inquiry made by a women's group paying a call on him, Obasanjo reminded the group that he said he would take his instruction from God but as of yet had not received his celestial instructions. However, Obasanjo said he expected to receive his orders "very soon." (Comment: Obasanjo is a religious man and appeals to religion are commonplace in all aspects of Nigerian life, including politics. While those who like Obasanjo will consider his statement as a sign of piety, many critics are beyond giving him the benefit of the doubt, spiritually, politically or otherwise. Some have openly poked fun at his statements about divine instruction. They believe that the voice he finally hears will tell him to run simply because that voice will be his own. End comment)

President and House Remain at Loggerheads

5. (C) The financial disclosure standoff between the Presidency and House of Assembly entered its second week. Speaker Na'abba claims the House is almost out of funds for its operations but that he will not buckle to Obasanjo's demands to furnish an accounting of members' salaries and other emoluments. Na'abba's position is that the Revenue

Mobilization and Fiscal Commission, an arm of the executive, has this information as it is the body that actually calculates payments to members. Obasanjo had barred the payment of salaries and other funds to the House until the Speaker complies with his disclosure requests; however, the President did agree to partial payment earlier this week after the intercession of Senate President Anyim and PDP Chairman Ogbeh.

16. (C) This impasse has affected the 2002 budget process as the House has delayed consideration of the measure, citing the lack of money as impairing its ability to function. Additionally, Na'abba has filed suit seeking an order compelling Obasanjo to release the funds. (Comment: This is the latest in a string of rows between Na'abba and Obasanjo. If one did not know better, it would seem the two were in different political parties. Since they are not, it appears that Na'abba is consciously staking out a position as an independent, if sometimes opposing power node to Obasanjo within the party itself. While probably excluding himself from the "Friends of Olusegun" list, this ploy will likely boost Na'abba's appeal among disenchanted elements in the party as well as with members of the Northern elite critical of Obasanjo. End comment.)

Firings at the Electoral Commission

17. (C) Out of the blue, President Obasanjo dismissed 34 of 37 Resident Electoral Commissioners (REC). Although having their offices in the 36 states and the Federal Capital Territory, RECs belong to the Independent Electoral Commission hierarchy, not the state electoral apparatus. While the President's action were undisputedly within his constitutional prerogative, the action might not go down well politically. For some, the excuse that the REC's were dismissed at the behest of the governors of the affected states due to security reasons or for corruption does not hold water. There was no inkling that any of them was under investigation nor has any incriminating evidence been disclosed. Moreover, the 34 dismissed RECs were appointees of former Head of State Abubakar while the three who escaped the axe were recent Obasanjo appointees. This has some observers suspecting that Obasanjo is trying to stack the electoral deck with his acolytes. Should he go ahead and appoint known loyalists to the positions, many people will begin to cry that an electoral foul has been committed.
Jeter